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Citation for published version:

Lawrie, A 2018, 'Who's listening to modernism? BBC features and audience response', *Media History*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 239-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Media History

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Media History on 07 May 2018, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348>.

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Citation for published version:

Lawrie, A 2018, 'Who's listening to modernism? BBC features and audience response' Media History, vol 24, no. 1, pp. 1-14. DOI: 10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348

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[10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1471348)

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Who's Listening to Modernism? BBC Features and Audience Response

The BBC Features Department was *the* space for experimentation in broadcasting from the mid-1930s until its closure in 1964, attracting many of the period's most talented writers and producers including Elizabeth Bowen, Rayner Heppenstall, Louis MacNeice, Seán Ó'Faoláin and Dylan Thomas, and led by the enormously committed Head of Features, Laurence Gilliam. Kate Whitehead has identified that in the first decade after the Prix Italia competition was established in 1948, practically all of the BBC's entries for the award were selected from Features, and all of its winners.¹ The Features output was rich and varied, incorporating programmes on science, travel, geography, literature, history and biography, particularly during the 1940s and '50s, when the Department was producing its most innovative work. The focus of this article is on a sample of the literary features it produced and, in particular, the ways in which these programmes reflected on and adapted various aspects of modernist innovation, as well as examining how listeners responded to these features. It will therefore begin by offering some detail about the reputation of the Department at that time. Thereafter it will describe the work of the BBC's Listener Research Section, which was established in 1936 to gather information about the public's response to programmes in general. It will then concentrate on three features from the late 1940s and early '50s, each of which were either focused on the work of or written by an important modernist writer – Virginia Woolf, David Jones, and Herbert Read – examining the content of these programmes, the modernist techniques and innovations they adopted and the impact of these broadcasts on listeners in order to trace the effects of literary modernism when adapted into an aural experience.

The feature format was a notoriously difficult one to define. In Gilliam's introduction to his 1950 book on the subject, he posed the question, 'What then, precisely, is the feature programme?', before admitting, 'There is no precise answer'.² Because, while the plays produced by the BBC Drama Department (headed by Val Gielgud) derived from the conventions of theatre, features were a fresh, hybrid form developed specifically for radio that borrowed from documentary, drama, and the radio talk, without exactly emulating any of these forms. This presented the Department with much more freedom: Douglas Cleverdon, one of its most lauded producers, described the feature form as having 'no rules', and delighted in the scope for experimentation this allowed.³

The Listener Research Section was set up in the mid-1930s for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was an effort on the part of the BBC to appear more responsive: given that the Corporation was funded by public money, it was prudent to be seen to seek public opinion on what this money was being spent on. Although a Programme Correspondence Section had been established in 1924 to respond to the more than 50,000 letters received by the BBC every year by 1927,⁴ those who wrote into the Corporation were of course self-selecting individuals whose views could not be taken as a fully representative sample of the general public, and a more systematic method of gathering information was therefore mooted – even though this initiative was itself imperfect. But it is worth noting at this point that not all the pressure for audience research was coming from outside the Corporation; many producers also felt they were 'broadcasting into a void', with no clear sense of how their programmes were being received by ordinary listeners.⁵ The BBC therefore hired Robert Silvey, a statistician for the London press exchange, to formulate various ways of sampling public opinion on a selection of programmes. It was made clear from the outset, however, that Audience Research had a limited remit: it was for information purposes only, and unlikely to have a direct impact on policy or scheduling. Although Silvey created various different methods of measuring and sampling public opinion on programmes (for instance the

Variety Listening Barometer, and the Continuous Survey of Listening), my interest lies with the Features Panel, set up in 1942 and comprising of listeners who tuned in regularly to features and were willing to provide feedback on a volunteer basis. This panel had a fluctuating membership which was maintained at around the 600 mark, with an average length of service of 18 months. A confidential BBC report of 1944 stated that every effort was made to ensure that the structure of the panel corresponded to the feature programmes public more generally; their comments, therefore, can be taken as broadly representative. Many of these listeners, the report also revealed, used features for educational purposes, with programmes on scientific discoveries, travel, history, and biography in highest demand. But it is also worth acknowledging at this stage that Audience Research was not without its detractors. In Silvey's account of his time at the helm he describes how some of his new colleagues at the BBC 'dismissed market research as so much ballyhoo ... the Board of Governors, they argued, were the representatives not the delegates of the public and its decision to embark on audience research amounted to an abdication of its responsibilities'.⁶

Panellists' duties were simply to complete questionnaires (which they were sent) about the features they listened to, with their answers providing the raw material for the reaction reports produced by Silvey's department. These reports usually ran to one or one-and-a-half pages per programme, consisting of an 'Appreciation Index' (the mark out of a ten given by each panellist, averaged out to a percentage), an estimate of general audience size, an overview of the response to the programme, and some sample quotations from a handful of respondents. Each report was circulated to the relevant producer, the head of their department, and the schedulers, although anyone in the BBC was permitted to see a copy. This was not, of course, a perfect model for gathering audience feedback: a larger panel would have provided a more accurate picture of how each programme was received; the fact that not all programmes were surveyed means that feedback cannot be compared across a department's entire output; and the reports that were produced for individual programmes were far from extensive. But the reports do, nevertheless, provide us with a constructive if partial impression of how the programmes examined in this article were regarded at the time of broadcast.

***A Room of One's Own* (1946, Home Service)**

The remainder of this article will focus on three features which were either centred on the work of or written by an author whose work has come to be associated with literary modernism, and tracing the audience response to each. The first of these is *A Room of One's Own*, a 30-minute feature about Virginia Woolf and her work, written by the novelist John Hampson, produced by Edward Livesey and broadcast on the Home Service at 7.00pm on Sunday 25 August 1946.⁷ Programmes of this type functioned as didactic tools, but the tone was also inclusive and encouraging, motivating listeners to broaden their cultural horizons after hearing them. This accorded with the aims of the first Director-General John Reith, who had left the BBC in 1938: although he was certainly no admirer of modernist literature, in more general terms he had been determined to use the wireless as a way of fostering cultural tastes. Thereafter, during William Haley's tenure from 1944 to 1952, the model of a 'cultural pyramid' was mooted – the idea being that by providing listeners with small amounts of more serious material on the Light Programme, they would feel encouraged to move up to the mixed programming provided on the Home Service, and eventually then graduate to the Third Programme, the highest cultural echelon, which was established in 1946. The feature on Virginia Woolf, a Home Service broadcast, worked in this fashion by taking a 'difficult' modernist writer and successfully encouraging listeners to start reading her work. But while the author and material under discussion was undoubtedly challenging, the programme itself

was not presented in a particularly innovative or complex format; it was conversational, informing, and reasonably light-hearted.

According to the research report, this programme on Woolf commanded only a small audience – around 2% of the listening public – but it was noted that a study of the life of poet William Cowper, *Deity Disowns Me*, which was broadcast a week earlier in the same slot, had an audience of a similar size, suggesting that it may have been the timing, rather than the subject matter, that kept the audience figure low.⁸ The format of the feature is of a conversation between two men – a Man and a Business Man. But there is a third character, too – the popular radio actress Marjorie Westbury plays the role of Virginia Woolf, and she cuts in with lines or passages from Woolf's writing to illustrate the case the Man is putting to the Business Man, which is ultimately to convince the Business Man, a reluctant reader, of the quality of Woolf's work. The Man is a recent convert to Woolf, and is trying to persuade the Business Man – and, by extension, the listener – to start reading her.

This Home Service broadcast went out a month before the BBC's dedicated 'high cultural' Third Programme was launched, and was therefore aimed at a broad listenership, but the script testifies that it did not shy away from discussing some of the innovative aspects of Woolf's writing. A line from *Mrs Dalloway* – 'Life, London: this moment of June' – becomes the keynote of the broadcast, and fundamental to how her work is understood. At every juncture Woolf's affection for the city streets, with the immediacy of 'everyday life' is emphasised. But it is made clear that Woolf also looks deeper than other writers, reaching for the material they might easily overlook, in order to communicate life's fluidity: 'She rescues the treasures which we conceal under the mound of common experience. She rifles dumps and rubbish heaps to produce jewels and precious fragments' (15). And the Man continues, in a rather dreamy fashion, to describe what he perceives to be the effect of Woolf's prose: 'In reading the novels of Virginia Woolf you will find again and again that like a poet she catches a fleeting moment or mood, which by the delicacy of her perception she fixes exactly in all its exquisite freshness and beauty so that it endures' (17). The Business Man, playing the role of gruff philistine, swiftly dismisses this perceived loftiness, objecting to the lack of facts, or supposed real life, in her novels: 'Why doesn't she tell us how rich people are, how much land they own, how many bedrooms they have and what kind of car they keep. Something solid. Any child can blow bubbles, or look through coloured glass'. At this point Westbury steps in with a passage from the end of *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily Briscoe, having returned to her painting after a lapse of ten years, thinks back to Mrs Ramsay, and recognises her ability to take ordinary moments from everyday life and shape them into something articulate and emphatic – into something akin to art:

V. WOOLF: What is the meaning of life? That was all. A simple question, one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark, here was one. This, that, and the other, herself and Charles Tansley, and the breaking wave; Mrs Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs Ramsay saying 'Life stand still here'; Mrs Ramsay making of the moment something permanent. (18)

By quoting this passage, the point is made, however subtly, that Woolf's great achievement was to produce art out of the quotidian, and that listeners might reasonably turn to her novels as the means to cast new light on familiar aspects of their own lives. Reading Woolf, it is suggested, will encourage them to see things in new and alternative ways. This serves as a rejoinder to the Business Man's complaint that Woolf's writing seemed without purpose, offering nothing either 'solid' or 'serious'.

Woolf's own personality is also discussed. She is described by the Man as a 'Lover of life' who 'once played a part in a great hoax' (10), disguising herself as an Ethiopian prince and smuggling aboard a battleship, and also accepting a bet to write a book that would be chosen as a Book of the Month club selection:

B.M. What an absurd story. Why she didn't know a thing about popular appeal.

MAN: Didn't she? Anyway she knew all about the English passion for dogs. And her book *Flush*, the biography of Elizabeth Barratt-Browning's spaniel had an enormous public success. And what is more to the point, it was the first choice of a Book Society. And that is true, even if the anecdote is false. The legends are numerous – but never believe the one which tells you that she turned her back on life. (10-11)

This focus on the more light-hearted aspects of Woolf's personality was key: the writer of the script John Hampson never shied away from the fact that 'She is not an easy writer', but he was also keen to foreground her more human aspects, because this would render her more approachable for the ordinary, interested reader, and thereby encourage them to try her novels.

The research report demonstrates that this feature chimed with listeners: the quotations from the novels Westbury read out were felt to have been 'not only delightful in themselves, but also representative of the writer's works', while the 'questions and answers' between the two main characters – one enthusiastic, the other sceptical – was a 'great help to better understanding of the writer', addressing the same types of reservations that the some listeners had also felt. But this feature did more than simply offer entertainment and interest over a half-hour period: based on the sample of quotations in the report, the programme also stimulated some listeners who had previously felt intimidated by Woolf's reputation to try reading some of her work for themselves. One respondent, described as a bank inspector, offered the following comment: 'Until now, I have always understood Virginia Woolf to be overwhelmingly highbrow and unreadable. The broadcast perhaps put matters into truer perspective – it certainly interested me, and I feel that I must make her closer acquaintance – even though a little warily'. Another, an art teacher, felt encouraged to make another attempt at reading her work: 'I had only struggled with one of Virginia Woolf's books, and had never reached the end – now, having heard this programme, I feel I would like to have another try. Some bits were lovely, and much easier to understand than I had imagined [she] could ever be.' Not all of the feedback was positive. Some 'manifestly had no interest in Virginia Woolf', found the programme 'vague, highbrow or boring', or were 'unable to understand her'. But if we are to see these quotations as representative of a more general response (and the careful composition of the listener panel suggests we should do just that), there is still plenty of evidence that large numbers of listeners used literary features as a 'way in' to approach the more 'difficult', modernist authors.

***In Parenthesis* (1946, Third Programme)**

By contrast, radio adaptations of *In Parenthesis*, David Jones' epic poem of the First World War published in 1937, were modernist in presentation, style and content. Douglas Cleverdon eagerly took on the task of adapting it for radio presentation: it had been due for broadcast on Saturday 11 November 1939 but with reduced programming following the recent outbreak of war his production was shelved. Cleverdon's production was announced in *Radio Times* for broadcast on Tuesday 10 November 1942 but this too was abandoned at the last moment in favour of a broadcast by Winston Churchill. Cleverdon's adaptation was not, in fact,

broadcast until 1946, when it went out on the Third Programme on Tuesday 19 November (8.30-10.00pm), preceded by an introduction by David Jones himself. This 1946 production received regular repeat broadcasts into early 1947. On Thursday 11 November 1948 (8.25-10.00pm), a 'New production of the broadcast on November 19, 1946' (with lead roles taken by the same actors as in 1946) went out for Armistice Day, again with Cleverdon producing; as indeed he did once more for the a brand new, and longer, production which was aired on Sunday 30 January 1955 (3.00-5.00pm).⁹

Jones' long prose poem – acclaimed by W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, and most famously T. S. Eliot, whose influence helped get it published by Faber and whose 'Note of Introduction' is printed in most modern editions – is widely regarded as a significant modernist work: certainly Eliot argued that it was as important as the later work of James Joyce and the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound.¹⁰ It is also one of the very few which dealt directly with the events of the First World War. The poem employs what is recognised as the 'mythical method' Eliot described in '*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth', and implemented in '*The Waste Land*' – drawing on the mythic past as a way of giving order and shape to contemporary history.¹¹ Jones utilises the early medieval Welsh epic *Y Gododdin*, the Bible, texts by Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Malory, and others dating from ancient Rome onwards, as paradigms or templates for conveying, in a seven-part narrative form, his own six-month experience as a soldier in the trenches between December 1915 and July 1916. Almost all of the soldiers encountered in the poem will die, except for the central character John Ball (played by Emrys Jones in 1946 and 1948 and Richard Burton in 1955; Stephen Murray had been due to take the role in 1942). Fred D. Crawford suggests that Jones manages to position the First World War 'as part of a tradition' but 'without ennobling the struggle'.¹² He does this by indicating the presence, or survival, of past conflicts: the voices of soldiers from ancient and medieval battles percolate the narrative, and are conflated with those of Welsh and English soldiers in the 1916 battalion. There is at all times the sense of a deeper parallel world mirroring that of the present day: John Ball's experiences of trench life are rendered on a mundane level, with the tedium of routine tasks and conversations with fellow soldiers, but at any moment the narrative might shift in time and space to accommodate the alternative visions or experiences Ball is able to call forth. This might be knights seeking the Holy Grail, ancient Greece as described by Herodotus or soldiers on their way to Agincourt.

The production of Jones' work for radio in 1946 presented Cleverdon with significant challenges, not least the difficulty of cutting the poem into a length suitable for a single 90-minute broadcast. By looking at his 1946 script and cross-referencing this with the poem, it is possible to trace how the editing was carried out. As noted above, the original version contained unsignalled shifts between unnamed voices speaking in fragmentary dialogue, interlaced with literary allusions and digressions into an ancient Celtic underworld. Cleverdon overcame some of these difficulties of comprehension by creating three central voices to act as narrators: the Narrative of Action, with the most lines, which set the scene and described movements and events; the Narrative of Thought, which conveyed the emotions of the soldiers (most commonly fear and anxiety) in a poetic, contemplative tone; and the Narrative of Memory, with the fewest lines, usually referring back to Malory, or occasionally another folk tale. Aside from these three voices, the script also consisted of conversations taking place between the soldiers, but here rendered much more comprehensible than in the original poem. In order to demonstrate the latter point, it is worth comparing a section from the original poem with the abridged version from the broadcast script. In Part 7 of Jones' original poem, tension is high as the soldiers are counting down towards battle:

But they already look at their watches and it is zero minus seven minutes.

Seven minutes to go . . . and seventy times seven times to the minute.
this drumming of the diaphragm.

From deeply inward thumping all through you beating
no peace to be still in
and no one is there not anyone to stop
can't anyone – someone turn off the tap
or won't any one before it snaps.

Racked out to another turn of the screw
The acceleration heightens;
The sensibility of these instruments to register,
fails;
needle dithers disorientate.

The responsive mercury plays laggard to such fevers – you simply can't take any
more in.

And the surfeit of fear steadies to dumb incognition, so that when they give the order
to move upward to align with 'A', hugged already just under the lip of the acclivity
inches below where his traversing machine-guns perforate to powder white [...]
you have not capacity for added fear only the limbs are leaden
to negotiate the slope and rifles all out of balance ...¹³

Cleverdon's 1946 script reveals the kind of changes he made:

JENKINS: Zero minus seven minutes, Sergeant.

SERGEANT: Seven minutes to go

NARR. OF THOUGHT: And seventy times seven times to the minute, this drumming
of the diaphragm.

NARR. OF ACTION: Racked out to another turn of the screw the acceleration
heightens.

EFFECT: (MACHINE GUN FIRE)

NARR. OF THOUGHT: The surfeit of fear steadies to dumb incognition.

BALL: When they give the order to move upward to align with A, you have not the
capacity for added fear, only the limbs are leaden to negotiate the slope. (48-9)

This example shows that large chunks of unassigned text are broken up by Cleverdon, with lines given to narrators and soldiers, and amended to work as dramatic scenes. Listeners appreciated his work on the script: 70% of respondents praised it in the highest terms, commenting on the 'vivid picture' created, the 'glowing imagery of the language', and the 'interweaving of thought and action'.¹⁴ These comments provide us with a valuable insight into how high modernism – albeit an adapted, abridged and simplified version – was being received over the wireless. Cleverdon's creation of three distinct narrative voices, set apart from the soldiers' dialogue, was also regarded as a particular triumph, as the following remark suggests: 'It was vivid, poetic and arresting, with fine contrast between the private's educated and philosophical thoughts on the one hand and his immediate "earthy" existence on the other'. As one may expect with such a challenging piece of writing (and, indeed, with any kind of broadcast to a mass audience), the response was not one of unanimous approval: the research report also noted that 'small groups of listeners found the method of presentation too confused for their understanding, too broken by different kinds of narration and overcharged by esoteric thought sequences which inevitably reduced the speed of the action. Even some of the listeners who admired the script found that it required a sustained effort of

concentration which was tiring'. But this type of comment was not altogether surprising – the feature, though simplified, was not intended to be simplistic, and some of the shifts in tone are difficult to follow. This is particularly the case when the feature presents sections of soldiers' dialogue, immediately followed by the Narrative of Memory, the allusive, folk-tale narrator:

LEWIS: Sights at 350.

BALL: Yes, Corporal.

LEWIS: Starving as brass monkeys. Diawl!

N. OF MEMORY: Starved as Pen Nant Govid, on the confines of hell, where sits that wintry hag, the black sorceress. (17)

Yet without this stark and potentially alienating juxtaposition between these two forms of voice – one pragmatic and colloquial, and the other lofty and mystical – much of the force and character of the original poem would have been lost. Although the effect is jarring, we should recall that in the original, there is no line or voice distinction whatsoever, so it is for the individual reader to deduce who may be speaking or thinking any of those lines, rendered as follows: 'Starving as brass monkeys – as the Arctic bear's arse – Diawl! – starved as Pen Nant Govid, on the confines of hell'.¹⁵

Rose Macaulay reviewed this feature for her 'Critic on the Air' slot on the Third Programme. There she suggested that Cleverdon had actually improved on the original version of the poem, noting that 'for the first time it was clear who said which things', and commending Cleverdon for noticing the 'improbability' of a soldier's remark being followed, 'as if made by the same man, by a phrase or sentence out of character – a literary allusion, a quotation from Mallory [sic] or Milton or the Bible, or merely an over poetic piece of prose', and instead opting to give these literary quotations to one of the three narrators 'who take charge of the commentary when it isn't actually uttered by speakers'.¹⁶ Her ringing endorsement for this feature can be seen as representative of the enormously positive press response to the programme, but we might be wary about praise that appears to applaud deviations from the poem's original modernist form. Cleverdon made the changes he did in order to render it suitable for broadcast. He needed to set the scene, create parts for different actors, and to integrate those esoteric allusions in a manageable way. Macaulay gives the impression that Cleverdon had found something lacking in the original, and set out to rewrite it in a more realist style. But in fact he appears to have got the balance right: the mechanics of broadcasting demanded that he build in different characters, yet he still managed to retain the philosophical planes and linguistic textures that render Jones' poem so distinctive.

The listeners, more so than Macaulay, seem to have recognised this: a housewife was quoted in the report as saying of the actors' voices, 'They were as threads to make a harmonious tapestry of one portion of life as lived then and in that place'.¹⁷ This was remarkably close to Jones' own conception of the work: as he explained in the Preface (which he was also heard reading out at the start of the 1946 production), the poem was designed to be an experiment in writing, 'using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time and of those particular men'.¹⁸

Moon's Farm (1951, Third Programme)

In Parenthesis was a very different type of feature to the one on Virginia Woolf: it was dense and dramatic rather than explanatory and conversational, demanding far higher levels of commitment from the listener.¹⁹ That it managed to elicit a largely favourable audience

reaction demonstrates how Third Programme listeners were willing to engage with difficult modernist literature in a feature format. But not all Third Programme feature programmes hit the mark and negative receptions are revealing of both tastes and expectations.

The 1951 programme *Moon's Farm*, written by Herbert Read and produced by his friend and fellow Yorkshireman Rayner Heppenstall for broadcast on Sunday 21 January (18.55-pm) as part of the series 'The Inward Eye', was a poetic rendering of Read moving back to a part of Yorkshire where he had spent his childhood.²⁰ The work was later published as part of a longer collection of poems in 1955, and it belongs to Read's late period. It is a verse play written for three voices, with the overall theme as one of return. The Second Voice has come back to the site of the eponymous now-vanished farm, where he encounters two others: the First Voice, played in the BBC production by a woman, representing 'place'; and the Third Voice, played by a man, representing 'time'.

Moon's Farm opens with the First Voice describing her current homelessness, and looking back to an earlier time when Moon's Farm was being built:

A cave in the old quarry, a dry ditch, a broken-down barn – that is all my shelter these days. The sheep have gone, and with them the shepherds. That was twenty winters ago, and then came the men with axes and cut down the spinneys and plantations, lopped off the branches and carried the timber away, and left this desolation at the head of the Dale. (1)

This elegiac tone is retained as the play develops; at certain junctures an Aeolian harp is played, further contributing to the ethereal, numinous character of the piece. But also noticeable throughout, however, are the modernist elements. Read first met T. S. Eliot in 1917, and they became close friends, with Read contributing to *The Criterion* on a regular basis. By the 1930s Read was better known as an art critic, but he always saw himself as a poet first, and some of his early volumes in particular were written in an imagist style. Although his modernist tendencies were tempered in later years by a poetic philosophy which was increasingly indebted to the pastoral modes and settings of Romantic poetry, his facility for economic precision, and for crystallising a striking image, betray his longstanding literary connection to the work of Eliot and Pound. *Moon's Farm* is concerned with memory and a return to the land, but formally and also in terms of word choice, the poem still feels recognisably modernist: the three voices are palpably disembodied, with little attempt to make them into rounded characters. The reader (or in this case, and in the first instance, the listener) is also struck by a series of concise but fragmented images, and the recourse to myth as a means to emphasise the diminished contemporary circumstances:

The Greeks were right again: it is life that plays game of hide-and-seek – the rhythm of the seasons as an interplay of life and death. In the person of Persephone it is life itself that disappears for a wintry season. But hiding involves a hiding-place. In Eleusis you can still see the pit by which Persephone went down into Pluto's dark realm. All the ancient myths are precisely located. We have no myths today because we have no sense of place – the beliefs of our age are like gas-filled balloons, untethered. They disappear into the clouds – into the transcendental inane. (21)

The audience research report for the 1951 production of *Moon's Farm* indicates that its appreciation index was 59, close to the average of 58 for previous programmes in 'The Inward Eye' series, although below the current average of 65 for Third Programme features in general.²¹ Response to its content was far from laudatory: slightly more than a quarter of the panel 'found it "a little obscure" but were "set thinking" by it', but many 'dismissed it as

“a disjointed intellectual ramble”, bearing no relation to its subject’. The individual comments from respondents which were included on the report (presumably because they were deemed broadly representative) allow us to drill down for a more detailed view. One described *Moon’s Farm* as ‘ideal broadcasting material’, ‘A sensitive and moving account up to Herbert Read’s best standard’; another commended its ‘clarity of vision’. But the negative responses are more intriguing, both in terms of their specific objections to the programme, and also the fact that they were offered up by individuals – a writer, a student, a university lecturer, and a journalist – whom one might reasonably expect to be more sympathetic to Read’s experimental enterprise. The first of these, for instance, the ‘Writer’, answered as follows:

What can one say of this flimsy conversation piece? Its method of dialogue – ‘he speaks, then I speak, then he speaks again,’ etc. – left an impression of pedestrianism that wasn’t entirely justified by the contents of those speeches. It doesn’t seem to achieve anything. I believe the substance would have been better delivered as a verbal essay.

The chief objection here was to the perceived failed connection between the three voices, which were felt to be little more than disengaged mouthpieces for conveying insubstantial ideas. The ‘Journalist’ respondent, meanwhile, disliked Read’s allusions to other literary texts throughout the piece:

Would have liked to hear pure Read, uninterrupted by King Lear and Persephone who annoyed and distracted me. One just got absorbed in his theme about the ‘Logos’ etc. and then Lear butted in, or Persephone to say his bed was made, or the pee-wit had a few words to say. Most irritatingly disrupted and it had such immeasurable potentialities.

And finally the university lecturer suggested that ‘A little more local colour would have built up the atmosphere more successfully ... Not enough was done to help the listener to share some of the author’s feeling for the place’. This last reservation was shared by the wife of a factory inspector: ‘I did not see what purpose was served by the “genius loci” and her aged father, of whose identity I was never sure. The prose was good to listen to, however, and a something emerged, but for me it was not connected in the least with a sense of place’. What is most striking in these comments is the impatience with those aspects of the play we would identify as recognisably modernist: those disembodied voices, the oblique references to other literary works, and the discomfiting sense of dislocation, or unreality, in terms of setting. Another comment, from the wife of a metal turner, sums up this general confusion: ‘It isn’t often I listen to the Third Programme. The title, *Moon’s Farm*, drew me, but the play, well, it must have been too highbrow like chamber music. Usually I can remember a play and tell my husband all about it, but this one, nothing at all, it was queer’. Given the markedly more enthusiastic response accorded to *In Parenthesis*, we can infer that modernist features (and perhaps features in general) were most successful when they were introduced thoroughly, giving the listener a chance to approach the work from a place of familiarity: as mentioned above, the radio adaptation of *In Parenthesis* included a long preface from David Jones in which he explained the wartime context of the piece, and prepared listeners for the mixture of Welsh and English voices, dialogue and liturgy. *Moon’s Farm*, lacking this type of framing, left many listeners simply baffled.

Conclusion

Clearly the response to *Moon's Farm* contrasts with the more enthusiastic reports on the Virginia Woolf programme and the adaptation of *In Parenthesis*. Clearly, when the material being covered was perceived to be challenging, listeners responded well to gentle guidance on how to approach the work and what to look out for – although it is worth pointing out that in the feature on Woolf, her most experimental works, such as *Jacob's Room* and *The Waves*, were barely mentioned at all, as if the techniques on display in these novels might prove too alienating, or simply could not be explained within a half-hour programme for the pre-Third Programme Home Service audience. As noted above, *Moon's Farm* was part of the series 'The Inward Eye'; these types of series, which were premised on a particular theme or idea, were created as a way of encouraging authors to produce new material for the BBC. The wireless feature was still to some extent an unfamiliar format, and one within which many writers were unwilling to work, so the logic went that if the central premise was already there (in this case, describing a subject or events into which the writer had a particular insight, and couching it in a poetic narrative), the writer only needed to find their own take on it. But many of these series, 'The Inward Eye' among them, still struggled to find writers willing to produce material, and quality could sometimes suffer as producers such as Heppenstall and Cleverdon scouted around for contributors, and the series itself was shifted to different producers. The radio adaptation of *In Parenthesis*, on the other hand, had been the 'long-standing proposal' of Cleverdon, and the production featured 'quasi-liturgical interludes' written by the renowned composer Elizabeth Poston and sung by Henry Washington's Schola Polyphonica choir,²² while major acting roles were, across different productions, taken by Leonard Sachs, Dylan Thomas, and Richard Burton. In general, therefore, this was simply a better-quality production, based on source material that was indisputably first rate. By the early 1950s listeners had become discerning arbiters of feature programmes, responding to them, on the whole, as culturally beneficial moments, and when they failed to deliver, they were criticised and producers and writers urged to do much better.

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Notes

1. Whitehead, *Third Programme*, 119.

2. Gilliam, *BBC Features*, 9.

3. Cleverdon, *Growth of Milk Wood*, 17.

4. Briggs, *Golden Age of Wireless*, 67.

5. Whitehead, *Third Programme*, 53.

6 Silvey, *Who's Listening?*, 32.

⁷ Page numbers in brackets in this section refer to the script which can be consulted in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

⁸ Listener Research Report for *A Room of One's Own*, 5 September 1946, LR/6073, BBC Written Archives Centre.

⁹ Page numbers in brackets in this section refer to the 1946 script which can be consulted in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

¹⁰ **Eliot reference to follow.

¹¹ **Another Eliot reference to follow.

¹² Crawford, *British Poets*, 228.

¹³ Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 155-6.

¹⁴ Listener Research Report for *In Parenthesis*, 2 December 1946, LR/6740, BBC Written Archives Centre.

¹⁵ Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 52.

¹⁶ Macaulay, 'Critic on the Air', 1.

¹⁷ Listener Research Report for *In Parenthesis*.

¹⁸ Jones, *In Parenthesis*, x.

¹⁹ Listener Research Report for *In Parenthesis*.

²⁰ Page numbers in brackets in this section refer to the 1951 script which can be consulted in the BBC Written Archives Centre.

²¹ Listener Research Report for *Moon's Farm*, 13 February 1951, LR/51/181, BBC Written Archives Centre.

²² Cleverdon, 'David Jones and Broadcasting', 73.